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ABSTRACT

In the past few years there has been an increase in the discussion of health care as a right. Although the statement that health care is a right sounds good and altruistic, it does not deal with the political or economic realities of health care, especially for blacks. The health care industry represents approximately 8% of the Gross National Product. However, the black family has not really benefited from increased government spending on health care. The health care needs of the black community must first be established. Improved environmental conditions must be developed. The numbers of minority health providers must be increased. To bring about these suggested changes, it is necessary to redistribute the federal health care dollar into the black and minority community. The only way that this can be done is through the political process. Blacks can contribute to their health by becoming involved in the political and economic life of the black community. (RLV)

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Health Care as a Right: The Politics and Economics

by Meredith F. Sirmans

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In the past few years, in association with the rise of consumerism, there has been increasingly voluble discussion of health care as a right. But the question of health care as a right is not new to the public arena.

The idea that health care is a "right" has been a part of the political expectations of the American people for the past 40 years. Franklin D. Roosevelt included health care in an economic bill of rights he proposed in the 30's. President Truman used the premise of health care as a right in a study he commissioned in 1945. In 1968, Senator Edward M. Kennedy suggested: "All Americans have come to expect health care as one of the basic rights of citizenship." [1]

How the idea of health care as a right has evolved is puzzling and curious. Traditionally, rights have been created to limit the power and influence of government. But, for Blacks and other minorities, the Federal government has been the means through which Rights have been achieved.

Although, the statement that health care is a right sounds good and altruistic, it does not deal with the economic or political realities of health care. In order for health care to be a right, we should be able to clearly define, as to, what we mean by health. When defining health and health care do we mean that everyone should have access to health care facilities? Do we mean that everyone should have health care with dignity and respect?, or, do we mean that health care should be available so that everyone can have good health?

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The last question is important, for in order for us to have good health care, we must also know what is good health. The definition of health that I find most appropriate is that of Dr. Mervin Duval wno defines health as that "state that permits one to achieve an acceptable accomodation to one's environment and circumstances and to be able to fully join with others in being productive and useful members of society." [2] This would exclude a sizeable number of Blacks and minorities, because many have not received the opportunity to attain an accomodation with society, let alone the opportunity to be useful and productive. For me, then, health is defined in subjective terms. Health is then the individuals perception of themselves, physically, in relation to their environment. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health in a negative sense, which is contrary to my perception of health as being a positive experience.

For the Black individual who is attempting to succeed in this Society he must look at health in a different perspective. To have achieved society's acceptable accomodation would have inhibited the evolution of Blacks in the 50's and 60's. It would mean that a look at Black urban families would find them in a state of ill health. But to look at in a positive sense, we have our health and we want it maintained so that we can go about the business of reordering our environment so that we can then find the more universal definition of health, useful; for our needs.

Health care need not be defined as a right and I think that any differences are purely semantic, but we can demand access to health care and the opportunity to achieve good health as a right.

For Blacks the question of health care and its provision, represents major decisions, that are governed by political and economic considerations.

The economic aspect of health care is related to the fact that the

health care industry represents approximately 8% of the Gross National Product, and the current rate of increase it will soon represent 10% of the Gross National Product. We are now talking about money that represents figures on paper, and is reflected in terms of real money as the cost of health care to individuals. What has made the cost, of health care a major issue has been the constantly spiraling increase in cost that has been greater than the rate of inflation and the rate of increase in the cost of living for the past 15 years. As the cost of health care, continues to rise, there is greater and greater involvement by government in paying the cost of care.

As a result of government programs in the years of the Great Society, Medicare and Medicaid was born. The development of these programs assisted the growing health care industry, as it opened a new source of revenue, the Federal Treasury, for it to feed from; as it grew into its present, and continually growing, size.

However, the Black family has not really benefitted from the opening of the Federal Treasury. There has not been an increase in the number of health care institutions in the urban area. There has not been a significant increase in the number of health care providers in the urban area. (Depending on the decision by the Supreme Court in the Bakke case - will determine if affirmative action will continue to increase the number of minority (Black) health care providers in this country.)

The economic picture is also clouded by the enormous sums of money, which were only fantasy numbers to me, billions of dollars, - part of can you top this - billions and billions of dollars - just words - not real money like when we pay our taxes. We must begin looking at how these funds are being spent from the Public Treasury for health care. As we consider the fact that the funds are coming from the Public Treasury, this then in-

volves political decisions.

So health care as a right becomes a question of economics and politics. We must begin to develop institutions which are geared to the needs of the Black Family. We must develop a strategy that involves, what I feel is the most important aspect for health care for Black families and the Black community.

1. We must first establish for our community what are really our health care needs. - We can not, nor need not build massive institutions with the latest in technologic advances, bacause that is not part of the primary health care needs of our community. We need establish an educational process by which people are made aware of those things which contribute to their good health, i.e., nutrition, housing, sanitation, gainful employment, not the public dole.

2. The development of all the resources necessary for the individual to achieve an acceptable accomodation with their environment. - Constructive employment, Day Care Centers - Education which functions as education and not as a place to go in order to stay off the streets. Housing that is indeed shelter.

3. We must demand that the numbers of minority health providers increase from the standard 2% of the total physician population, to numbers that accurately reflect the numbers of Blacks and Black families in the country. When we have sufficient numbers then each community should not have a problem recruiting a provider who is interested and concerned about the Black family and the community. By increasing the number of professionals - we will not have a shortage of primary care providers in the Black community.

As a consequence of sufficient providers, we will not have a need for all the associate programs that have evolved to provide for minority communities, we can have the professional. I don't mean to knock or disparage the

the various Professional Assistant or Associate Programs, but the Black community needs the best trained professionals, who are attuned to the needs of the Black community. We don't find a push for Professional Assistant or Associate Programs in the Suburban areas surrounding our urban and Black communities.

In a study recently reported in the New England Journal of Medicine, one of our more prestigious and enlightened medical journals - and as we are well aware medicine, is a most conservative profession - it was clearly pointed out that irrespective of ability to pay, either by the third party payment or direct pay - Blacks and minorities are more likely not to be operated on by the most advanced trained surgeon.[3] They were more likely to use the hospital as their health care provider and as a result their health needs were most likely met by residents in training than by an attending physician who has completed his training.

This particular problem can be corrected by increasing the number of Black health professionals available for the Black community. As there is an identity with the Black family and community, the Black physician must be and will be congnizant of the needs of the Black community. There are important elements of the Black experience, which can only be appreciated if one has participated in that experience.

As, I am a believer in the value of Preventive Medicine and early recognition of ill health, when one has easier access to health care, one is more likely to use the resources available to you. This is especially true if it is sensitive to your needs.

Early recognition of disease or ill health and early treatment reduce the cost of health care, because it is much easier to treat early illness, - which is cost saving in terms of professional time and ultization of health institutional time.

When one is in an environment, which promotes good health and addresses itself to the issues that further contribute to good health, illness is less severe and recovery is faster.

But, to bring about these suggested changes, it becomes necessary for a redistribution of the health dollar into the Black and minority community. To bring about this redistribution involves access to control of the Public Treasury and that means of control is votes.

As, I look at the political scene, we have not made a stand on the quality of health care that is rendered to the Black and minority community. When there is a question of grant money, or money required for funding health care programs, we do not have any Blacks involved on the committees involved in making major health care decisions.[4] Recently, in New York, it was demonstrated that the United Way, was inadequately distributing its funds raised in and for the Black community. The same is true in the health community.

Harlem Hospital Center, a major hospital in New York City and the only hospital, that I am aware of, which is a major hospital and is predominately staffed by Blacks, with the exception of Howard University and Meharry Medical College, is and has been underfunded. It is underfunded in comparison to its needs as an institution, it underfunded in comparison to the community that it serves, and in comparison to other institutions of the same system.[5] Recognizing that it was a difficult time in New York, financially, the underfunding was even greater in terms of the needs of the community that it serves. The underfunding has prevented a major reduction in such areas as infant and neonatal mortality, and poverty related diseases.[6]

The only way that this underfunding can be corrected is through the political process. It will call for a combining of the expertise of the concerned health provider with the desires and vote power of the Black com-

munity.

Only then will we achieve health care as a right - the right of access, the right of concern, the right of empathy and understanding. When we recognize that our rights are achieved politically will we have imput into the economics of health care. When we have sufficient individuals who are concerned with our health and health care, can we achieve the type of political power that will provide the Black community with the health care that it needs, and not a system that will provide care, but does not begin to address our needs.

We can then have a system of health which permits us to achieve an acceptable state of health by all definitions - subjective or in relation to our environment.

We all will contribute to our health by being involved in the politics and economics of the Black community.

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